

Glimmers of Hope - Emergent Writing and Reading in a Multilingual Foundation Phase Classroom

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Introduction

In this paper I describe one aspect of a larger project of PRAESA (Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa) which includes a multilingual Grade 1 class at Battswood Together we are exploring strategies for multilingual education with an emphasis on supporting and developing mother tongue teaching and learning. Before moving to the substance of this presentation - early literacy teaching and learning, I will briefly give some background information about the nature of this joint project.

The new Language Policy for Schools (July 1997) promotes multilingualism through additive approaches¹ to languages in teaching and learning. This implies significant challenges for Primary schooling - in the ex DET schools, L1 (mother tongue) education should not cease and be replaced by English, but rather the additional language/s be added to the L1. In the ex 'white' and 'coloured' schools which have admitted large numbers of African language speaking children, the path is open for finding ways to challenge the currently accepted practice of providing education in English, or Afrikaans with little if any reference to the home languages of children.

With backing from the WCED, the relevant parents, principal and other staff members at Battswood,² PRAESA arranged for Ntombizanele Nkence, a recently graduated Xhosa speaking primary teacher, to join the classroom of Erica Fellies, the 'resident' Grade 1 teacher. Their task this year has been to work together, to explore strategies for team teaching, to teach the Xhosa speaking children in Xhosa, and to introduce Xhosa to the English or Afrikaans speakers; and to teach English to the Xhosa speaking children. Together the two teachers have also been trying to find ways of doing 'outcomes based' ie meeting the requirements of the new curriculum.

Learning to Read and Write in Xhosa and English

Initiating the programme in Grade 1 included making decisions about which language or languages to use for initial literacy teaching and learning. PRAESA's intention was to use both Xhosa and English. Several of the children are bilingual in English and Afrikaans and while both the teachers and the children use Afrikaans, they do so in a random, 'natural' way. The decision taken was that for teaching, the systematic focus would be on Xhosa and English this year.

Erica had experienced working with a Xhosa speaking student in a team teaching situation for a term in 1997³. Many teachers who work with children whose language they cannot understand express the view that despite all efforts to make these children feel comfortable, there are some who remain reserved and uncommunicative. This is also one of the first noticeable changes in such children when an adult who speaks the same language is available to help. Erica was already aware of such potential benefits for her young Xhosa speaking pupils.

¹ By this, it is meant that children should be taught in their mother tongue with other languages being added on to this. The mother tongue should not be replaced by other languages for as long as this is feasible and should be supported and maintained despite the addition of the other language(s).

² Battswood Primary in Wynberg is an 'English medium' ex 'coloured' school with a staff group who are all English and Afrikaans speaking but with a mixture of Xhosa and English/Afrikaans speaking children

³ This ongoing initiative arises out of an arrangement between PRAESA and Cape Town College. It involves students who speak African languages doing their practice teaching in multilingual classrooms with support from PRAESA staff.

Because of the new learning programmes for the Foundation phase, both teachers were also aware that they would need to make adjustments to the curriculum in any case, and that these would include changes to teaching reading and writing.

Our Approach to Emergent Literacy

A large body of theoretical data and classroom research about multilingualism in education and how young children become literate informs the approaches we are trying out at Battswood. Many of these pedagogical principles which underpin good practice are now to be found in the Curriculum 2005 documents for the Foundation phase (See my summary of these in Appendix 1).

The teachers were willing to take the step to use both languages for literacy. However they did initially share the concern of many teachers and parents across South Africa that (if African language speaking children are sent to a school to learn English) spending time on Xhosa would 'take away' time from English, and lead to slower or no progress. By the end of the 2nd term, this fear had given way to pleasant surprise. The two teachers noted that not only was the confidence and enthusiasm of all of the children apparent, but also that the Xhosa L1 children's progress in English was more than satisfactory.

Like most Grade 1 teachers, Erica had been used to working with a phonics-based approach to initial reading and writing. Over the last few years, as increasing numbers of Xhosa speaking children made their presence felt in her classroom, her job became more and more difficult. Evidence from other countries suggests that learning problems attributed to a heavy reliance on phonics for children learning in their mother tongue (Wallace 1988) are greater in the case of L2 learners. In South Africa, the potential for difficulties is intensified for young children, who are learning in a L2 or 3, have not been through a preschool programme, and have had relatively few opportunities to develop understandings about written language before formal schooling. It is a fact that those children who find learning to read and write a relatively painless process, have generally had innumerable positive encounters with print, including abundant pleasurable interactions with stories and books, in their mother tongue, before starting formal education.

Local research in Cape Town schools (Bloch, De Klerk, Pluddemann 1996, Bloch 1997) documents approaches to language and literacy in Reception year and Grade 1 classrooms. The view of many teachers interviewed was that they must teach 'the basics' (ie phonics) before exposing children to other more complex aspects of literacy. An assumption that children will get confused if they are required to grapple with more than a simplified programme of restricted language (usually devoid of relevant social or cultural content), lies at the heart of this. There is no doubt in my mind that this practice of limiting children's first encounters with written language dulls and delays their initiative to become readers and writers. Anyone who spends time with babies and young children knows their passionate determination to explore, and their immense capacity for self-expression. Oral language is usually acquired and perfected as a matter of course in intricate, yet unstated adult-child partnerships with the child working on making sense of and being an active participant in her world. But with written language, we block children off from the very strategies, which they have developed that will assist them to do the same with written language. This is the case particularly with writing (Bloch 1997). When we restrict first encounters to patterns and controlled exercises, copying letters, words and sentences, we limit them to the role of imitator.

Yet there are examples from all over the world which show that with encouragement and support young children construct the writing system for themselves, slowly but surely developing interest and profound understandings about the nature of writing. What counts equally to physical muscle control and neatness are their growing insights about how they can make use of writing in their own lives. The scribbles and marks, the back to front letters and the invented spellings (Bissex 1980) are all testimony to children's ability to 'do it' for themselves. The influence of the 'restricted' approaches I describe is widespread— it pervades thinking about the beginnings of literacy at home and at school. Grade 1 children gave us evidence of these effects in their initial hesitancy to take any initiative to write. To help them rediscover their own incentive and creativity with writing has become one of our main challenges.

Strategies

While the teachers would continue to teach phonics, we decided to prioritise exposing the children to regular encounters with different options for real engagements with print in Xhosa and English. An important rule which we have followed is that the teachers always make sure that the children know which language they are using at the time.

Team teaching strategies

The teachers are evolving a system of planning and practice which involves them in continuous thought about team teaching. By team teaching, we mean a co-operative situation where two (or more) teachers take joint responsibility for the education of the same children. This therefore includes the notion that teachers can be working with different groups of children at the same, or different times.

We have a range of options, which they use at various times:

- both teachers work together with whole class: Teacher 1 (T1) introduces lesson in English or Xhosa, Teacher 2 (T2) summarises in the other language. Reverse next time. All children are exposed to content in both languages.
- T1 with Xhosa L1, T2 with English L1 for L1 support, maintenance and development
- T1 with English L1, T2 with Xhosa L1 for intensive modelling/ enrichment

Biliteracy

Outline of strategies

- Allowing regular time for looking at/reading books alone and with friends
- Encouraging talk and discussion among the children themselves, and between teachers and children;
- Encouraging the children to write from the beginning;
- Encouraging the children to write for real reasons;
- Encourage the children to share expertise with each other;
- Finding ways to help all children develop self-esteem, confidence and initiative.

We decided for this year to focus on the following strategies for introducing biliteracy:

Rhymes, songs and stories, in both English and Xhosa

Stories are read or told each day. We need to ensure support and maintenance for both English and Xhosa speakers, as well as allowing them to learn each other's language. Therefore there are regular sessions with the children in their home language groups – with the teachers alternating between groups. An obvious and significant benefit of regular group work for language development is that there are opportunities for the children to enter into real dialogues with the teacher and each other – these are far too often luxuries in early childhood classrooms.

Ntombizanele describes what she does:

“Sometimes I would tell a Xhosa story (to the whole class). When I read a story in Xhosa (I am) using expressions so that the English and Afrikaans speakers can understand. But what I would do after the story is get them to tell me what they understood - it's difficult for them if I don't use expressions or use my hands and body to show what I'm talking about, but when I do, it's easy for them to follow and (they) know what's going on and they would try to tell me, and then I would get a Xhosa speaker to tell the story in English.

If the story has been translated and we have that book in both Xhosa and English, then I would read Xhosa and Erica would read the story in English. Or (we would) read English today, the next day read Xhosa”.

Initially there was a degree of restlessness among the speakers of the 'other' language during a whole class story time. However, as the year has developed, once the children know a story which has been read to them in both languages (these are picture book stories especially chosen for their vivid text and illustrations), they absorb themselves in both situations.

- *Rhymes and songs* are taught and practiced daily in English and Xhosa. Generally the class works together on these, as rhymes and songs provide easy and enjoyable introductions to the sounds and (non)sense of each other's languages, as well as serving to develop confidence and a sense of unity among the children.

The teachers make most rhymes and songs into large posters, and these are displayed and used as reading material. It is important that the visual/print environment reflects our society's multilingualism to promote positive attitudes towards languages. Many teachers will agree that it demands commitment to be vigilant in making sure that you do not neglect this subtle but enormously important task.

- *The children read regularly alone or with friends.* They choose their own books, from a donated selection. The teachers have expressed wonder at the depth of feeling the children show towards these books. Put simply, they love them. This is where they immerse themselves in the 'world of books', and have relaxed opportunities to develop their concepts about print. They talk about the pictures, they make up or read the stories, and they look after the books, taking turns to tidy them away. For many children, these opportunities are restricted to school. This is a good reason why such activity should be given highest priority.

Although many teachers recognise that there is value in sending reading material home, many express the real concern that children lose books, or that the books are dirtied or even destroyed. We decided to try a different strategy – the teachers make reading materials out of the rhymes and songs and children’s group writing. This is typed up, with an illustration (drawn by the children or begged, borrowed or stolen from elsewhere!), and inserted into a plastic folder, Xhosa on one side and English on the other. Parents were informed at a meeting and through a letter that the children would be bringing these home regularly to share (see Appendix 2). They are presently used in different ways: the class reads them together, the children choose a “friend who speaks a different language” to read with, and they get taken home. Thus far, while showing signs of wear, the plastic folders have not been lost, and we have informal reports from both Xhosa and English speaking parents to the effect that they enjoy these bilingual interactions!

The value of such literary activities described above should not be underestimated. Among other things, the teachers provide positive role models for both languages, an attitude of openness to learn from each other is alive, contributions from home and community life of all of the children are present in the classroom, the message is clear that Xhosa is equal to English as a language for reading.

Different kinds of Writing in Xhosa and English

We discovered that getting children to take risks with writing was not a quick and easy process. It quickly became apparent that they came to school with a strong perception that they needed to have the teachers show them what to do, and that they should only copy, and not try to spell for themselves. They had a fear that they would ‘do it wrong’. However, we gave them a clear message that print is important. In Ntombizanele’s words:

“Children write everything from rhymes on the walls, stories we did with them, and anything we had done e.g. how to grow vegetables. If they have to write for themselves, we would have words that we knew they can’t write for themselves e.g. compost heap.

It’s very difficult to try to tell them to write without copying. They keep on asking how to write this and that. They don’t want to write for themselves. But then we did manage to get them to write and the results were amazing. We are getting there. Moving from copying and then trying to write”.

Sometimes the teachers give the children a choice as to which language to write in, sometimes they are asked to write in a specific language. At all times, we try to keep the children conscious about which language they are using. A range of strategies are being used to encourage the children to write.

These include:

Teachers tell stories which the children then help to retell in their own words. Teachers write this up in large for them all to read. Children then copy this or write their version in their books, the teachers write on the board spelling of vocabulary words that the children ask for, teachers write what children dictate, children then read to each other.

- *Teachers and children compose letters* to family members at home, or elsewhere. The children then either copy the teacher's or make their own versions.

Where to get what to read?

PRAESA assists the teachers to ensure that we have the use of:
 newspapers, magazines, packaging and junkmail
 some commercial picture story packs, readers
 a donation of a limited collection of story books with versions in both Xhosa and English (and sometimes Afrikaans)
 the local library – story and reference books
 a donation of old story books
 materials which we make ourselves: posters of bilingual rhymes and stories, smaller versions (A4) written and illustrated, stored in plastic sleeves
 a flipchart for writing with groups of children;
 scrap paper from anywhere.

Conclusion

The work which I describe here, is work in progress, which will continue to develop over the years which follow. Hopefully it will form part of a growing body of development research which helps teachers across the country in their task to implement SA's new language in education policy.

I can end on a bright note which struck me one day as I arrived in class. I was greeted by Erica with a pile of writing which the children had done. They had learned the song "Five Little speckled Frogs" and several had followed up with writing on the frog theme. What they write is simple, and yet profound, because their own initiative is clearly apparent

The Frg is her, I luyk The Frg The luyk me/ I hufe a Frog/ uno masele/
 my Frog is green/ I luv The frogs, frogs luyk to sot in the rod/I so a frog wn i was comeg
 ot skul/ I see 1 vog and my vog is
 my vog is brown

Erica's words "We were astounded" sum up the glimmers of hope educators feel when small but deeply significant steps are taken, which serve to inspire us all to carry on.

APPENDIX 1

1. Appropriate teaching begins with and builds on what children know. This principle applied in multilingual contexts supports prioritising developing the language/s which the children already know.
2. All aspects of language are interrelated and understandings in one aspect can help to develop and support other aspects. Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and in

a multilingual society, also translating and interpreting should all be developed and supported.

3. We emphasise the advantages of promoting approaches to literacy learning which view literacy as social and cultural practices, with concentration on involving children in using written language for real and personally meaningful reasons. Emphasis as children learn to read and write is on use, with mechanical skills being taught in context as teachers assist children to read and write for a range of purposeful reasons.
4. The ways that children learn to speak are similar to how they learn written language - children actively construct their own hypotheses about the nature of language, test these out and shape these against encounters in their daily lives.
5. Each of us is a learner and a teacher, and teachers and children learn from each other. Mistakes are valued – they offer insights about the learner's understandings.

APPENDIX 2

Letter to parents:

11 March 1998

Dear Parents,

Exciting things are happening in Grade 1 at Battswood this year.

1) We are working closely with PRAESA from UCT, to explore the new language policy for schools. We have a Xhosa speaking teacher, Ntombizanele Nkence who has joined the Grade 1 team.

2) We also begin implementing the new curriculum this year.

Both of these things mean that there are some changes in:

- the way we use languages in the classroom;
- the materials we use;
- our classroom layout;
- the way we teach;
- our expectations of the children;
- your involvement as parents in the classroom.

We are very happy to answer any questions you have about any of these things. We also want to ask you whether you can help us!

We are making a book corner in each classroom. To become readers, children need to look at books, and read and be read to as much as possible.

We need cushions for our book corners.

Who can send a cushion to school, or offer to sew covers for cushions?

We need extra help with story telling and reading.

Who can come and tell or read a story to one or two children?

You can come any time, early in the morning, or when you fetch your child.

It can take as little as 10 minutes of your time.

If you cannot come, is there someone else in your family who can?

Who will tell or read stories at home to their children?

Who can donate 2nd hand books to our classrooms?

Please phone us or come and talk to us, if you are willing to help, or if you have other ideas.

Erica Fellies, Veronica Fester, Ntombizanele Nkence. Grade 1 teachers.

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